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Tim Kelley

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Facing Issues—Making Choices

TIM KELLEY

As long as I can remember, there has been a “quiet relocation” in progress among churches of Christ. Members have shopped for the Church of Christ of their choice. If the nearest congregation didn’t seem compatible, they found a closer match further down the road. Painfully, at times the relocation was far from silent. Struggles over the control and direction of congregational life often blazed into a destructive fire. In the end, a large exodus left a much smaller and hurting congregation. We are now in the midst of a “noisy” time. In many congregations, the fires of discontent and acrimony are growing. Battles are being waged over how churches will worship and how women will participate in the life of the church. A sizable relocation is taking place and many are relocating outside our fellowship. I sense a deepening gulf and want to address the growing division and the damage it is causing. This is not peculiar to churches of Christ, but these are my roots and a heritage I embrace with love, and so the following remarks are specifically addressed to those who share this heritage.

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

My initial title for this essay was, “Issues That Threaten to Divide Us.” The more I considered the title, the more dissatisfied I became with it. Think of the image it creates: helpless Christians facing the onslaught of devastating issues. It is, of course, the perfect spin for our age: “It’s not our fault! We had to divide in the face of such issues!” We would like to see ourselves as passive and the issues as active (no-fault-divisions!), but we are called to face reality and face ourselves as we stand before God.

The truth is that people—not issues—divide the church. In the Restoration Movement, we have divided over missionary societies, instrumental music, church cooperation, the number of cups to use in the Lord’s Supper, kitchens in church buildings, and other matters. While the specific issues were the matters about which we disagreed, it was the people who chose division in light of those issues. Members of the church decided that division was preferable to unity if unity meant accepting an opposing viewpoint or practice. My interest at this point is not to decide who was right and who was wrong in these; it is rather to say that all were responsible.

The victim role is a popular role today and the line is long to audition for the part. It is certainly easier to tell the world that we are victims of division rather than to confess that we are perpetrators of it; yet playing the victim will not help us face difficult questions. We do face difficult questions, but we are the active and responsible parties. We must begin by facing up to the reality that if and when congregations split, we will have done it.

I am convinced that until we accept our responsibility genuinely to seek the will of God and to love one another, it will do little good to address the issues themselves. Even the best textual work will accomplish little apart from a passion to be united in love and truth. Before we face the issues, we must face ourselves.

OUR DEEPEST VALUES

Just before the Civil War a father sent a letter to his son. In part, he wrote:

I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation....It is idle to talk of secession. Anarchy would have been established and not a government.

Shortly after writing the letter, Robert E. Lee accepted the position of Commander of the Army for the Confederate States. Although Lee professed allegiance to the Union, it is clear that he chose a deeper loyalty. His true country was Virginia, not the United States. When Virginia seceded, however much Lee may have opposed the secession, he followed his truest loyalty. *We always choose to follow our deepest loyalties.*

I believe that we all value unity. Yet it is not our deepest value. If it were, we would not have divided as often as we have. What do we value more than unity? We may answer that we would sacrifice all but faithfulness to God for unity but that answer demands sober reflection. Would we really sacrifice traditions we love for unity? On the other hand, would we sacrifice approval by our most valued peers in order to maintain unity?

If we value faithfulness to the will of God over all else, then we must be prepared to seek his will. This cannot be a cover for doing what we already believe is right. Our obligation will not be to defend our position but to discern God's position. That task is neither light nor easy and it must be approached with humility and prayer.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Several years ago, a friend told me of an exchange he had with an elder of a congregation for which he preached. The elder told my friend how they would deal with a problem issue. When my friend objected saying, "But Paul said..." the elder interrupted saying "I don't care what Paul said, we are doing it this way." My friend was stunned but had to admit that the elder was at least honest.

We face some issues with magnanimous tolerance. We usually do so because we don't care deeply about those issues. They are our "matters of opinion." When we really care about an issue we are not nearly as likely to be so tolerant. We may never admit it to ourselves but there may be times when we are like that elder. I wonder if zealots on either side of some issues ultimately care what the Bible says.

Our obligation will not be to defend our position but to discern God's position. That task is neither light nor easy and it must be approached with humility and prayer.

It is much easier to spot this attitude in others than it is to see in ourselves. Many of us have been in situations in which we believe we have convincingly demonstrated the importance of baptism by immersion for remission of sins only to have the person with whom we are studying reject the point altogether. It seems clear to us that loyalty to a particular church tradition or family attachment is more important than the Bible to that person. We are not immune from having those same loyalties. It may be that for us the "right answer" is more important than the biblical

answer. When that happens—and it often happens on both sides of "hot" issues—we talk past each other. The Bible becomes a weapon we wield rather than the authority to which we yield. We might even glory in our use of the "sword of the Spirit" to attack our opponents.

When this happens in congregations, the Bible is lost and the dynamic is radically altered. Instead of seeking God's will together, we become opponents seeking to win battles by the most adroit "sword play."

We “thrust” and “parry” with points of grammar and interpretive rules, looking for a weakness rather than the truth. We see the moment as a win/lose contest, and in the end, with blood spilt, it has become lose/lose, with the body of Christ hacked in two.

WHAT WE WANT THE BIBLE TO SAY

Everyone who views the Bible as our true authority, is biased. We not only want to know what the Bible says, but we want the Bible to say certain things. We read the Bible for affirmation as well as for information. We should acknowledge that we are not “blank slates” collecting biblical data for scientific analysis. Knowing what we want the Bible to say will help us to discover what it does say.

Again, think of our hypothetical study with a man who is resisting our understanding of baptism. He wants to find texts that affirm his resistance, and not surprisingly, he does. He turns to Romans 10:9–10 and announces “Not a word about baptism here!” Having found what he wants, he uses the text as a “trump card” against every text that includes baptism.

None of us are free from that use of scripture.

When we find what we’re looking for in the Bible, we use those texts as the lens through which we interpret the rest of scripture. Should a Christian ever drink wine? If we want the Bible to say “no,” we will find our texts: “Wine is a mocker...” (Prov 20:1), “Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup...” (Prov 23:31), and “... a bishop must be...not given to wine” (Titus 1:7 KJV). On the other hand, if we want the Bible to say “yes,” we too find our texts. We find that: Jesus “changed the water into wine” (John 4:46, 2:1–11), “the Son of Man has come eating and drinking...” (Luke 7:34), and “No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach” (1 Tim 5:23). Each side uses “their” texts as the interpretive lens through which they view every other text.

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Admitting that we want the Bible to say certain things allows us to factor our bias into our study. We will be wary of selecting one or two verses to support our desire. Instead we will seek to look at all of scripture and place every text within its larger context. In the case of the Christian and wine, we will study the social and cultural context in the ancient world and also come to see the broader issues of drunkenness, addiction, Christian liberty, and the conscience of others.

Importantly, such a confession challenges us to be serious about our claim to want to know what the Bible says. We will have to ask ourselves whether our conclusions are the *result of our study* or simply the conclusions we already held as we entered the “study.” Within a congregation, this admission can make us partners in a common quest to know what the Bible says, *even though we may have conflicting desires*. If my greatest loyalty is to be faithful to the will of God, and I discover that I have been wrong, I have not lost. I have won.

UNDERSTANDING DISTANCE

For some, the very mention of the views of Alexander Campbell ushers in the response, “We have no creed but the Bible.” The irony is that Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Walter Scott, some of their contemporaries, and many who followed after them, inevitably affected our understanding of the Bible, including our commitment to have no creed but the Bible. Our movement took shape through a devotion to follow the Bible as our only rule of faith. No one of the first generation in our movement thought through this commitment more than Alexander Campbell did.

In chapter 2 of Campbell's *The Christian System*, he gives seven rules for interpreting the Bible. These rules are largely common-sense rules that apply to interpreting any ancient text. While Campbell used and advocated historical, cultural, and linguistic tools to interpret scripture, he left to last the rule he considered most important. He said, "For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable: We must come within the understanding distance."¹ The understanding distance was a circle of understanding that allowed one to hear the word of God. This was not an academic exercise that required intellectual skills, for "God himself is the center of that circle, and humility is its circumference."²

For Campbell, Christians should read the Bible to encounter God and his will. Humility and a single-minded devotion to that goal were the essential requirements.

But, receding from pride, covetousness, and false ambition; from the love of the world; and in coming within that circle...the voice of God is distinctly heard and clearly understood... "God resisteth the proud, but he giveth grace to the humble."

He, then, that would interpret the Oracles of God to the salvation of his soul, must approach this volume with the humility and docility of a child, and meditate upon it day and night... To such a one there is an assurance of understanding, a certainty of knowledge, to which the man of letters alone never attained, and which the mere critic never felt.³

I suspect that Campbell knew that not everything in the Bible would be easy for even the most humble and honest seeker of truth. His point should not be lost on us, however. Coming to the Bible for truth is a matter of humbly seeking God.

Campbell made it his practice to combine the reading of scripture with prayer:

God now speaks to us in his written word, and we speak to him in our prayers. Thus we have communion with God through his Holy Spirit which is imparted to us. If we listen to God when he speaks (for he speaks first as becomes him) he promises to listen to us.⁴

Who could doubt that a humble, prayer-filled reading of scripture by the church would ease our passage through difficult issues? Wouldn't it be far more likely that we would approach one another in loving humility if we first approached the scriptures in humility? The Letter of James says it well: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (James 1:19-21).

OUR HISTORIES

It is easy for us to deny that we have been shaped by history. Where denials not only exist on the level of church history but also on the level of personal history, we tend unreflectively to consider our own past to be the standard for how things ought to be. I remember being very surprised during my first full time preaching ministry at how often I seemed to step on land mines. Issues that never were considered crucial where I grew up were volatile and explosive in my new surroundings. Such experiences have taught me that people within the same congregation can have widely differing views of how things should be, *depending upon their own histories*.

When our personal histories are warm and affirming we may find changes unwelcome. On the other hand, if our personal histories are filled with hurts and resentments we may be inclined to welcome almost any change. Yet, *neither the warmth nor the bitterness say anything about the changes themselves*, only about us. As much as possible, we need to put distance between our own histories and the issues. *The issues should stand or fall on their own merit*, not upon the memories they rekindle within any of us. Do any of us have the right to hold the church captive to our memories?

Sunday school, invitation songs, Sunday and Wednesday night assemblies, hymnbooks with musical

notations, pulpits, pews, and indeed church buildings themselves have come down to us through historical circumstances. None of those items can directly be found in the Bible. We have found them good and worthwhile and embrace them still. At times, however, missionaries have found it necessary to free the congregations they serve from these items in order to bring the gospel to people who are in very different cultures with different histories. As good as they might be here, these American Christian practices may get in the way outside of the historical context that brought them about.

Even in America, times and circumstances change. The agricultural demands that shaped schedules of nineteenth-century churches gradually gave way to the demands of the industrial revolution. Just as churches adjusted to a different set of challenges then, so we will have to adjust as we face our own changing world.

We have often stressed the commonalities that bound New Testament churches together, but there were also considerable varieties among those churches. Antioch was not identical to Jerusalem and hopefully Corinth was unique. *Not all variety among churches is a sign of apostasy.* The challenge has always been to hold fast to the unchangeable gospel while we, with Paul, “become all things to all people, that I [we] might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22).

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

The story of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* transcends the peculiar issues of a Jewish family trying to survive in the hostile culture of pre-revolution Russia. Tevye is a father who seeks to maintain the traditions that kept Jewish families strong and together. He faces a series of changes to those traditions and finds himself deeply conflicted. As he ponders each challenge, he laments: “pull out a prop and where does it stop?”

We all ask similar questions. We see changes in our culture and ask where these changes will lead. In many ways, the prospects are frightening.

It is legitimate to ask about any prospective change, where the change may lead us. Some changes have a dangerous trajectory that place us on a proverbial “slippery slope.” Once we make those changes, it will be hard to find the line to stop, and even if we do, it will be hard to apply the brakes. Yet that’s not true of all changes. If we project most any practice to its extreme we will see a frightening prospect.

Let me make the point with a seemingly silly example. Imagine that 100 years ago someone made the challenge: “If we have a song leader move his hand to the beat of a song, before long people will begin tapping their feet, then moving their entire bodies, and by the end of the next century they will be dancing in the aisles.” Now as far as I know, no one stated such a fear in that way, but the concern would have been legitimate. All we need to do is look at some of the televised religious programs and we will see people dancing in the aisles. The problem is not in the concern, but in the assumption that a particular activity will *necessarily* lead to that result. In this imaginary challenge, the fear never matched the reality. The practice of a song leader moving his hand, when done well, only led to congregations singing better. Not every slope is as slippery as we might fear.

While this example may seem far-fetched, it is not fundamentally different from the fears I have heard that praise teams will lead to rock bands in churches or that if women pass communion trays we will have women elders and advocate homosexual lifestyles.

Some changes may actually move us back up toward the top of a slippery slope that we already descended. That is the very premise of the Restoration ideal, “Let us restore the faith and practice of the New Testament.” That plea is based upon the conviction that churches have fallen away from the “primitive faith” advocated by the New Testament. Restoration is a plea to change, and can any of us be certain that we

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no longer need such change?

It is not enough to ask where a change might lead. We must first ask whether the change is biblical—"Is it God's will?"

On the other hand, seeking changes that will make us more acceptable to the community in which the church exists is a legitimate concern and one the New Testament shares (see 1 Cor 5:1, 14:16–25; 1 Thess 4:11–12; 1 Peter 2:12). However, it is not the first or most important concern. Those of us who push for changes that we believe will make the church grow need first to ask whether these changes are consistent with scripture. We should all acknowledge that some prices, if they violate the core of the gospel, are too high to pay for growth. We should also acknowledge that it is not always easy to see the long-term results of changes that may give short-term gains.

If a change is in conflict with the gospel, the church should resist it no matter how popular it might be. If it is in keeping with the gospel, the church should welcome the change and not worry about which side of the "slope" the change places us. Changes that are neither in conflict with nor demanded by the gospel are changes about which we should all allow freedom, and through which we should seek peace.

IN ALL THINGS LOVE

An important slogan resonated through the early days of the Restoration Movement, "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberality; and in all things charity [love]." A "flat" view of scripture, in which all things are of equal importance, has fostered an environment that has allowed us to make our own lists of those things that are matters of faith and demand unity, and those things which are opinions and allow diversity.⁵ We have sadly learned that we have not always agreed on which things constitute matters of faith and which constitute matters of opinion. We will continue to discover that reality. In those difficult moments of discovery, I pray that we not lose sight of the last phrase of the slogan.

Disagreement is not an excuse for uncaring actions and words. There can be no excuse for hatefulness in the body of Christ. Rudeness is not a sign of faithfulness. In the end we must all stand for our deepest convictions about God's will but we must stand in love. We are called never to forget that the very sisters and brothers with whom we disagree are those for whom Christ died. The moment we find ourselves "itching for a fight" had better be the moment we fall on our knees in prayer. The church is too precious to treat with disdain. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." (1 Cor 3:16–17).

TIM KELLEY

Mr. Kelley preaches for the Camarillo Church of Christ in Camarillo, California.

NOTES

- 1 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (1839; reprint, Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1988), 4. For an electronic file, see <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/cs/ac4c2.html>.
- 2 Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5.
- 3 Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5–6.
- 4 This is quoted in a paper by Steve DeFields-Gambrel, "Alexander Campbell: A Sacramental Christian," at <http://www.bethanyproject.org/campgam1.htm>.
- 5 1 Cor is an example of how the core of the gospel (15:1–8) is the matter of first importance through which Paul addresses the wide variety of problems that plagued that church. It is crucial to note, however, that even while those problems existed, Paul considered them to be, "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (1 Cor 1:2).